

Popular & Classical Music

The following article, adapted from the text of a talk given by the late Dr. V. RAGHAVAN, is published with the kind permission of Mrs. Sarada Raghavan.

Is popular music necessarily devoid of classical music? In other words, do popular and classical music form an antithesis? The question of popular *versus* classical music would admit of a further extension of the problem when we take up the question of a rendering of classical music in a popular style or form, so as to please the general public. In all such considerations it is clear that there are some features which we distinctly identify as popular, and some as classical.... Foreign visitors and musicologists too frequently ask us what our folk music is and what our classical music is and what we understand by these names.

The main difference between the two, which must be emphasised first, lies in the rendering: When the rendering is sophisticated, it is art or classical music; when it is plain and simple, it is the popular or folk variety. Sophistication includes all those rules and principles into which an art and its forms are codified and systematised. The well-known definition of *desi* in the text-books draws the line demarcating the classical and the popular in the 'niyama' or rules to which the former is subject and the freedom that the latter enjoys. To evolve a principle and to conduct ourselves in conformity to it is the mark of culture; it is true of forms of art also. It is therefore the artistic criteria which have been evolved that form the standard of judgement. While others like other things, it is the artistic criteria that the connoisseurs care for and appreciate, says Bharata when speaking of drama. Similarly that is art music in which artistic considerations alone prevail. The moment one sings down to the populace, one relaxes the high austerity of his art and makes concessions to popular taste by one or the other attendant features-- simpler or even not strictly correct or dignified but obviously more pleasing or at least catchy phrasings, the putting into the singing of more pure feeling-- of exhilaration, sorrow or devoutness, giving extra prominence to the rhythmic strikingness, or the volume, meaning and contextual importance of the words in the song. Now all these are features whose extra-importance is markedly seen in folk or popular music. Firstly, its rendering is simple; secondly, its rhythms are accentuated or palpable; thirdly, in close relation to the feature of simplicity is the circumstance that it is often sung by a group of people; and on account of all these reasons, it is likely to become also stereotyped and monotonous; its words are all-important; fifthly, it is rooted in a context, a festival, a season or an event; and sixthly, it is emotional or dramatic in its expression. Now, in art music in which expression is all in all, all these elements have to be given due proportion or, to put it the other way, be subservient to expression; hence it is that *Someswara* says-- in the music section of his *Manasollasa*-- that the acharyas or savants like the music that

is sama, i.e., that in which all elements are in a fine synthesis; i.e., in which bhava, raga and tala are evenly integrated. Even classical pieces of our great musicians who have mostly been saints and teachers are laden with thought and often with a profusion of literary and poetic expression. When they are, however, rendered as vehicles of teaching or as a means of pure devotional transport, they depart from the concert and take the turn towards Harikatha, keertan and bhajan. The song in art music has its own sahitya, bhava and rasa; a gifted composer might clothe his sahitya, which he has been careful enough to see is not word-ridden, with a melody, most suggestive of the mood. In fact, the word raga itself would justify its name by such employment; but such evocation of rasa is to be achieved through the actual music and not by importing into the rendering any extraneous or adventitious aid of an accentuated 'kaku' or intonation or manipulation of voice or affecting an emotion palpably by doing which the music again departs from the concert and turns towards the stage and drama.

The question of raga and rasa is frequently touched upon by speakers and writers. The term raga bhava would mean the specific ethos or form of a melodic mode, the correct configuration of which in the listener's mind should form the chief aim of the singer. Quite apart from this is the bhava or the thought, the ideas and feelings that may be composed into a song.

As already stated, in a masterly creation of a superior composer, there may be a unique integration of the two bhava-s, one fitting in with and suggesting the other. But there can only be an experimental and enumerative treatment of the question of what raga-s would suit what rasa-s or what rasa-s could be evoked by what raga-s. More fundamentally, there is a vital connection between swara-s and sruti-s, a raga may evoke more than one rasa and as surely as the frequency or sequence of certain swara-s, the tempo or the laya also plays a part in evoking the rasa. To evoke rasa with the words alone is to surrender music to poetry; while to evoke it through overloading one's rendering with pure feeling is to surrender it to drama. To evoke it by pure music is really pure music; and the rasa which this pure music evokes leaves far behind that realm in which the mundane sentiments of eringara, veera, etc., have their meaning. It is that ineffable bliss in which one gets absorbed as in samadhi. Thus does nada become the nearest portal to the Brahman.

The voice being the instrument of expression here and it being what it is, it is always liable to take on those features which would contribute to the detracting from the purely musical norm. Thus owing to its defects, it may put on needless intonation and try to achieve an end by the short-cut or a wrong bypath. Similarly it develops mannerisms and even leads to physical grimaces; while grimaces are definitely horrible, mannerisms often have a habit of becoming part of a musician's style and could easily masquerade as style and may even form the real ground of the popularity of some. If a voice is really ideal such

as the books say-- expressive without effort and possessing reach, resonance, sweetness, a pleasing quality, depth, softness and strength according to needs, cohesiveness and brilliance-- or if it is well trained, as in the West, there will be no occasion either for the musician to fall upon his mannerisms or for the listener to be misguided or distracted by them. One of the requisites when raga is sung is that the musician should employ the same or single vowel all through, preferably a well-mouthed or correct 'a' or at any rate not much variation of the vowels or consonants. When one thinks of this, one would prefer the instruments which indeed give us purer sounds. The voice is the most essential thing and yet it is the most neglected thing. In the South we are accustomed to overlook the bad voice and look to the raga-bhava, manodharma and kalpana and be satisfied with the intention even in the absence of execution; a highbrow critic will even look down upon a fine voice; but really speaking, the musical delectation here cannot be said to be complete. As in musical expression, so in voice, there should be an evenness or balance; for example, a gifted 'ravai-saareeram' may, by its sheer facility, develop aberrations of speed and twists which may not allow that visranti necessary for the proper imbibing of the raga-bhava. Those caused by facility of voice are as much mannerisms or drawbacks as those caused by the defectiveness of voice.

What has been said above would show that in art music, which we may call classical, the canons and requirements of art, the rules of balance, harmony, proportion, propriety, concentration on pure artistic resources to the exclusion of adventitious circumstances-- these are to hold sway, and absolute sway. The dilution of these strict standards and concession or over-indulgence in any one direction may be done for pleasing the lay persons in the audience; but that would be to make the music popular; or if it is purposely done for subserving another art or other purpose, it is applied music.

Music in which the popular qualities predominate had flourished side by side with classical music; the folk elements have also been continuously influencing classical music. In the history of any culture, one will see that, when a superior culture spreads from a region and acculturation starts in the form of the neighbouring peoples of an inferior or less influential culture imbibing that of the more powerful community, the process is not often one-way traffic. Almost always, the major cultural tradition that spreads out consolidates itself over new regions by absorbing, incorporating within itself and adjusting to its own scheme such of the local elements as are valuable and attractive. So do all major traditions become national culture, of significance to every region and group of people. This has happened in the history of our music also. The disappearance of the Gandhara-grama, the transition from the jati-s to raga-s, the reference to different schools are matha-s, Tamil music, several of the instruments, many of the raga-s themselves, numerous musical compositions-- those that one reads of in the treatises on music, really hold the key to the historical stage and

progress of the formation of what we now know as the classical tradition. It is to music and dance that we owe a clear formulation of this cultural process of give and take, but other vital departments of human activity, language and sociology, have not ignored this process of the main current and its regional tributaries. In sangeeta, it is marga, and desi; in language, Sanskrit and Prakrit, apabhramsa and desi. Students of the history of the raga-s can recall how the theorist, faced with raga-s from every part of the country, devised his first scheme of organising them on the linguistic analogy of bhasha, vibhasha and antarbhasha. And in sociology or dharma sastra, it is sruti and smriti on one side and desachara-s and kuladharmas on the other.

I have developed this idea at some length elsewhere and shall refer here just to some examples. Matanga calls his music work **Brihaddesi**. Among the raga-s, there are, as anyone who runs his eyes over their names can see, a large number bearing tell-tale regional and tribal names. Someswara makes express mention of the class of raga-s bearing desa names. In Carnatic music we know of raga-s like Yerukala-Kambhoji, Gumma-Kambhoji, etc., which are sophistications of folk melodies. The **Sangeeta Sudha** says that, in its treatment of raga-s, it has taken into account the music of Yakshagana. In fact, I think, a large number of what we call rakti raga-s falls in this class. In compositions, Someswara expressly mentions folk songs of Maharashtra and Karnataka and the occasions and the communities of people singing them; the Prabandha chapters of the **Ratnakara** and other works also disclose many a local composition that has been incorporated into the body of standardised types of composition. In instruments, many varieties of the stringed or the percussion groups can be mentioned. I shall just mention one instance which proved to be a fruitful one of investigation. Take the association of Matangi and veena and our worship of Rajamatangi carrying the veena as the goddess of music; this tradition, incorporated into the highest aspects of our musical philosophy, goes in its roots to the once numerous and artistically highly endowed Indian tribe called Matanga's whose arts were absorbed but who themselves were either absorbed or became so completely degraded socially that Matanga or Chandala came to mean a Harijan. The Chandalas again are a class of people who had their veena which Sanskrit lexicons specifically remember. Take the numerous technical terms, names of gamaka-s, varieties of voice, its qualities, etc., they are all in a local language of Western India. One of the most influential currents of the twin tradition of music and dance is the one whose course can be clearly seen from Kashmir to Tanjavur, from the times of the great commentators on Bharata's **Natya Sastra**, like Udbhata and Abhinavagupta of Kashmir to Venkatamakhi and Tulaja of Tanjavur. This tradition which followed the rise and fall of empires and the ebb and flow of patronage at different courts, flowed from Kashmir to Malwa and Gujarat, and to the Deccan and the South of the Pallavas and Cholas; from Malwa and Gujarat, it reached the Vadavas of Devagiri and the Chalukyas of Kalyan in Maharashtra and its border land with Karnataka; from there it reached the Andhra of

the Kakatiyas, the Reddis and the Rayas, and the Karnataka of the Ballalas; the whole thing then, entering Tamil country for a second time, converged at Tanjavur, where Karnataka, Telugu and Tamil geniuses thronged. In this course, it is known from Parsvadeva's **Sangeeta Samaya Sara**, it was Bhoja of Dhara who first introduced all the desi terminology in a language called Bhandira Bhasha. Not only is the concept of desi well-established as a department of our classical music-- in descriptions of music as ghana, naya and desya and the like-- but the intimate technical, critical and aesthetic terminology as far as the South goes, abounds in vernacular expressions. In the Prakirnaka chapters of our books, we read that a musician is entitled to the foremost status of Gandharva if he is proficient in both the marga and the desi.

Not less prominent are the desi strands in the art of dance. Suffice it to point out that, so far as the well-known historical periods are concerned, treatises on music and dance, like those of Sarangadeva, Someswara, Parsvadeva and Jayasenapati, included descriptions of local and folk dances. Jayasenapati's **Nritta Ratnavali** specifically sets apart its last three chapters to desi nritta and its varieties. Perani, Kolhatika, Bhandika Bahurupa, etc., are all such local forms. The Telugu **Basava Purana** of Palkuriki Somanatha says that the Saivite Perani dance came from Saurashtra and was shown as such in the court of Kalyan. At Kalyan itself, as Jayasenapati says, Someswara was captivated by the dance of the hunters, the Gondalis, and he systematised it in a set-scheme and described it in his work, from which it passed into the regular repertoire of dancers elsewhere. In fact, such local dance-forms were taken in, to an increasing extent, with the older marga forms growing less and less.

Thus the history of the arts of music and dance shows a dual stream, of a Ganga and a Yamuna, a frequent invigoration and enrichment of the main tradition by local forms which were fitted into the basic technique and higher ideology of the classical tradition. The desi supplied the material, the marga refined it and assigned it a place and wove it into the larger and richer scheme. The popular and the classical were thus the two currents, so to say, of the energy of our culture. Our art and culture thus stand forth like the image of Parvati and Siva in one, the Ardhanareeswara, a synthesis, of two in one inseparable unity.